

# **Introduction to Cultural Studies**

## **Lecture 10: Popular Culture**

### **1) The History of Popular Culture**

### **2) The Popularity of Literature**

### **3) Construc(ct)ing the Popular**

### **4) 1000 Years of Popular Music**

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### **1) The History of Popular Culture**

#### **What is 'popular'? (OED)**

- 'current among the general public; generally accepted, commonly known' (1; 1425, 1589)
- 'relating to, deriving from or consisting of ordinary people or the people as a whole; generated by the general public' (3a; 1533)
- 'cultural activities or products [...] [i]ntended for or suited for the understanding or taste of ordinary people, esp. as opposed to specialists in a field', a kind of writing' intended for and directed at a general readership' (4a; 1573)
- 'liked or admired by many people' (7a; 1608)
- 'forms of art, music, or culture with general appeal [and] intended primarily to entertain, please or amuse' (7b; 1730)
- '[a]dapted to the means of ordinary people; low or moderate in price' (4b; 1830)

***The History of Popular Culture (Cantor / Werthman 1968):***

The Classical World, to A.D. 450  
The Medieval World, 450 to 1350  
The Early Modern Era, 1350 to 1700  
Enlightenment and Revolution, 1700 to 1815  
The Forming of an Industrial Society, 1815 to 1914  
The Modern World, 1914 to 1955  
The Contemporary World, 1955 to the Present

Popular culture may be seen as all those things man does and all those artefacts he creates for their own sake, all that diverts his mind and body from the sad business of life. Popular culture is really what people do when they are not working; it is man in pursuit of pleasure, excitement, beauty and fulfilment.

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It is obvious [...] that as technology has increased the potential of communication, the expansion and enrichment of popular culture has been facilitated. [...] This means that in the modern era the forms of popular culture have multiplied enormously, and at the same time the possibility for people of divergent backgrounds to share the same cultural experience has become a reality.

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There is freedom and spontaneity in play not permitted man in his workday existence. Involvement in and enjoyment of popular culture permit the participant freedom to be himself. [...] The quality of volition therefore informs the whole history of popular culture [which] measures human potentiality [...] by demonstrating what [man] can do when left to his own devices, free to follow the inclinations of his mind and spirit.

(xxxvii-xxxviii)

## 2) The Popularity of Literature

(cf. Reinfandt 2011)

### Genuine examples?

- Elisabethan theatre
- Shakespeare in 19<sup>th</sup> century America

### Problems?

- individual reading vs. collective popularity
- why would individual experience be culturally relevant?
- the genius/poet/artist is somehow 'more equal than others', "not differing in kind from other men, but only in degree" (William Wordsworth)

### Walt Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

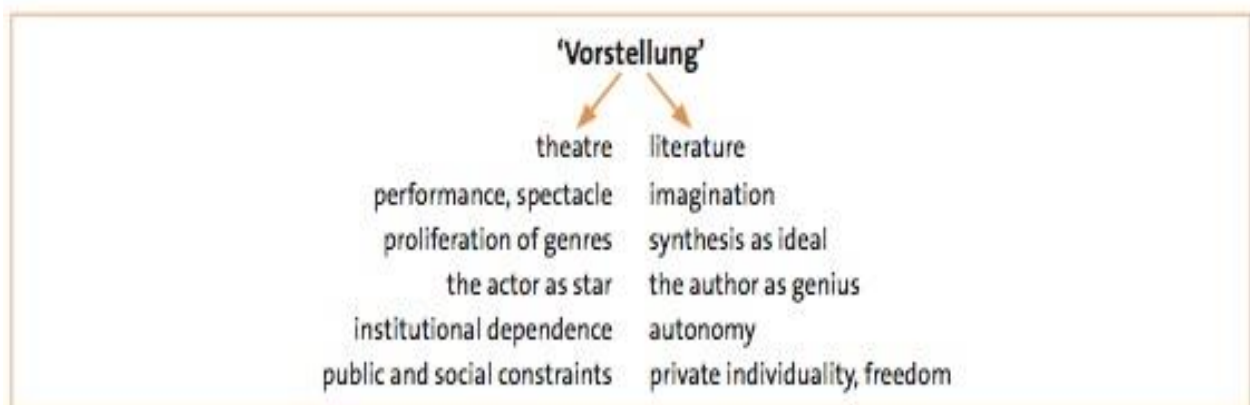
#### 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1855:

"The proof of a poet is that a country absorbs him as affectionately as he as absorbed it."

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1856:

"The proof of the poet shall be sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."

1882: ---



(Reinfandt 2012, 54)

**[*The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: ...*]**

**The Preface**

If ever the Story of any private Man's Adventures in the World were worth making Publick, and were acceptable when Publish'd, the Editor of this Account thinks this will be so.

The Wonders of this Man's Life exceed all that (he thinks) is to be found extant; the Life of one Man being scarce capable of a greater Variety.

The Story is told with Modesty, with Seriousness, and with a religious Application of Events to the Uses to which wise Men always apply them (viz.) to the Instruction of others by this Example, and to justify and honour the Wisdom of Providence in all the Variety of our Circumstances, let them happen how they will.

The Editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it: And however thinks, because all such things are dispatch'd, that the Improvement of it, as well to the Diversion, as to the Instruction of the Reader, will be the same; and as such, he thinks, without farther Compliment to the World, he does them a great Service in the Publication.

**[*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling.*]**

**Chapter I**

**The Introduction to the Work, or Bill of Fare to the Feast.**

An Author ought to consider himself, not as a Gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary Treat, but rather as one who keeps a public Ordinary, at which all Persons are welcome for their Money. In the former Case, it is well known, that the Entertainer provides what Fare he pleases; and tho' this should be very indifferent, and utterly disagreeable to the Taste of his Company, they must not find any Fault; nay, on the contrary, Good Breeding forces them outwardly to approve and to commend whatever is set before them. Now the contrary of this happens to the Master of an Ordinary. Men who pay for what they eat, will insist on gratifying their Palates, however nice and whimsical these may prove; and if every Thing is not agreeable to their Taste, will challenge a Right to censure, to abuse, and to d-n their Dinner without Controul.

### ***Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797:***

“*Take* – An old castle, half of it ruinous.  
A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.  
Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.  
As many skeletons, in chests and presses.  
An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.  
Assassins and desperadoes, *quant. suff.*  
Noises, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.  
Mix them together, in the form of three volumes, to be taken at any of the watering places, before going to bed.”

### **Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817)**

“[A]s to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time*, with the name of reading.”

## **3) Constru(ct)ing the Popular**

First the emergence of a separate popular culture in the period c. 1500-1700, second, the hardening of that culture into distinct, although regional cultures of the poor from approximately 1700 to 1850, and third the creation of a national popular culture beginning as early as 1800 but not coming into its full force until after 1914.

(Easton et al. 1988, 27)

In 1500, [educated men] despised the common people, but shared their culture. By 1800 their descendants had ceased to participate spontaneously in popular culture, but they were in the process of rediscovering it as something ‘exotic’ and therefore interesting. They were even beginning to admire ‘the people’, from whom this alien culture had sprung.

(Burke 1978, 286)

### ‘Inventing Popular Culture’ (Storey 2003):

“I will argue that popular culture is a category invented by intellectuals. Popular culture may be found in earlier periods, but the concept only emerges in the late eighteenth century in intellectual accounts of ‘folk’ culture. [...] [E]ach of the different ways in which popular culture is formulated always carries with it a definition of ‘the people’.”

(xi-xii)

high culture } folk culture } mass culture }	Culture vs. popular culture	↗ ↘	[universalisation]	aesthetics
			hegemony roots routes	
			[globalisation]	reflexivity

(Reinfandt 2010, 237)

## 4) 1000 Years of Popular Music

### [Richard Thompson, *1000 Years of Popular Music*]

“Ha! I thought, hypocrites, they don’t mean millenium, they mean 20 years – I’ll call their bluff and do a real thousand-year selection [...] starting in about 1068, and winding slowly up to 2001.”

(Richard Thompson’s response to a 1999 *Playboy* request to nominate the ten greatest songs of the millenium.)

The premise is that Popular Music comes in many forms, through many ages, and as older forms get superseded, sometimes the baby is thrown out with the bathwater – great ideas, tunes, rhythms, styles, get left in the dust of history, so let’s have a look at what’s back there and see if it still does the trick.

(Thompson 2006)

Richard Thompson: guitar and vocals  
 Judith Owen: keyboards and vocals  
 Debra Dobkin: percussion and vocals

DVD/CD recorded at Bimbo’s 365 Club in San Francisco in 1995.

Amazingly enough, we have reached the year 2000 and it's time to *lay down our weary tune*. This is a song by what might be considered a rather crass ... erm ... pop artist. Just my kind of person. It's a kind of classic pop song, and if we just take it out of the original hands and give it a slightly different interpretation, perhaps we can reveal it [sic] some splendour (if it has any). Strangely enough, its chord sequence is reminiscent of about the centuries [sic] and just towards the end we're gonna play it in the style of the sixteenth century just to show that it comes round again.

(DVD 1:25:05 – 1:25:56)

**“Oops! ... I Did It Again” (Karl Sandberg aka Max Martin and Remi Yacoub)**  
as recorded by Britney Spears (2000)

Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah  
Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah

I think I did it again I made you believe  
We're more than just friends  
Oh baby it might seem like a crush  
But it doesn't mean that I'm serious

'Cause to lose all my senses  
That is just so typically me  
Oh baby, baby

Oops! I did it again I played with your heart  
Got lost in the game oh baby, baby  
Oops! You think I'm in love that I'm sent from above  
I'm not that innocent

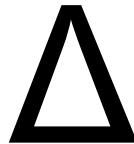
You see my problem is this I'm dreaming away  
Wishing that heroes, they truly exist  
I cry, watching the days  
Can't you see I'm a fool in so many ways

But to lose all my senses  
That is just so typically me  
Baby, oh

Oops! I did it again etc.

## Performing Rites (Frith 1996):

high art (bougeois music world)



folk art (folk music world)

pop art (commercial music world)

Authenticity in Rock Music

Modernist authenticity to be found more in	Romantic authenticity to be found more in
experimentation and progress (avant gardes)	tradition and continuity with the past (roots)
status of artist	sense of community
elitism	populism
openness regarding rock sounds	belief in core or essential rock sound
classical, art music, soul, pop styles	folk, blues, country, rock'n'roll styles
radical or sudden stylistic change	gradual stylistic change
irony, sarcasm, obliqueness	sincerity, directness
'recordedness'	'liveness'
'shocking' sounds	'natural' sounds
celebrating technology	hiding musical technology

(cf. Keightley 2001)

## Reading Song Lyrics (Eckstein 2010):

- Performativity and Performance
- Generic Conventions and Cultural Capital
- Sound and Songfulness
- Mediality and Musical Multimedia



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